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Dating Violence Experienced by Students at the University of Zambia

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Authors' contributions: Please write this section

This work was carried out in collaboration among all authors. 'Author DC' designed the study, performed the statistical analysis, wrote the protocol, and wrote the first draft of the manuscript. 'Author KT' and 'Author GM' managed the analyses of the study. 'Author SOM' and 'Author AM' managed the literature searches. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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ABSTRACT

Dating violence is a complex problem determined by multiple factors. Poverty, cultural and social environmental factors are a major contributor to the gender based violence. The aim of this study was to examine the nature and extent of dating violence experienced by students at the University of Zambia. Eighteen students (nine males and nine females) aged fifteen to thirty years were recruited from the University of Zambia hostels. In-depth interviews with semi-structured interviews were used for data collection. This study has found that various forms of dating violence exists at the University of Zambia. The study further found risk factors that were associated with dating violence such as consumption of alcohol and/or use of entertaining substances, as well as being involved in aggressive activities such as fighting or insulting; other factors included; poverty, experiencing of inter-parental violence and prior experience with violence. The psychological and emotional implications were that some students became depressed and stressed, insecure, ideated suicide,

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feared sex, distrusted people and were worried and uneasy. Under physiological and health outcomes, some students contracted STDs and HIV, body injuries, became pregnant, and others lost or terminated their pregnancy. Furthermore, social implications were that some students became aggressive, went into self-isolation, and began living recklessly. Physical abuse, verbal abuse, sexual abuse and psychological or emotional abuse were the most common types of dating abuse found at the University of Zambia. Conclusively, In addition to awareness against gender based violence, youth friendly corners should be considered during the treatment of gender based violence in universities.

Keywords: Dating violence; risk factors; students; University Zambia.

1. INTRODUCTION

Violence continues to be a serious growing public health concern. It is proving to be a major public health and social concern in the world at large, more so in institutions of higher learning. According to Dating Violence Resource Centre, dating violence is the physical and/or psychological abuse of one intimate person by another [1]. Dating violence manifests itself in many ways such as partner battering, property grabbing, rape, incest, defilement and sexual harassment [2]. Some studies have shown that there has been an increase in the rate at which violence occurs in African Universities. For example, in a cross sectional institution survey among College female students of three colleges in Awassa Ethiopia, it was discovered that the prevalence of experiencing any form of violence since enrolling at college and in the current academic year was 59.9%, 46.1% and 40.3% in those three colleges among the students that took part in the study [3].

The high rates of violence among students have resulted into high rates of student dropout in schools, poor performance, psychological distress, and an economic disadvantage for both genders as observed by Mengistab in a study at a Kenyan University where high rates of violence were observed [4]. Another study done in Southern Appalachia, showed that one-fourth of the 116 students surveyed either experienced or perpetrated violence towards their intimate partner and that one-fourth of women experienced some form of sexual assault [5,6].

A study conducted among undergraduate health science students at three Russian universities reported that 25.5% of students had experienced physical abuse and 3.6% had sustained injury because of violence [7]. In Greece, a study that was conducted at tertiary institutions among female students reported 46.2% sexual abuse prevalence [8]. Another study in Israel by Sherer

and Sherer in 2008 whose objectives were to assess the reciprocal behavior of couples in violent dating relationships, and to examine the socio-demographic variables that relate to dating violence among Israeli adolescents, brought to light the magnitude of violence in dating relationships [9].

In Nigeria, a study among university students showed that psychological abuse is the most common type of Intimate partner violence with 50.8% of perpetrators being male students [10]. In another study which looked at sexual violence among female undergraduates in a tertiary institution in Port Harcourt, found that 37.3% were abused by an intimate partner, 17.6% by a fellow student and 17.1% by a lecturer [11]. The study further found that most of the perpetration took place in the perpetrators' residence (32.6%), 10.9% in the victims' hostels and 10.4% in the classrooms. Severe physical dating violence has been associated with suicidal attempts or ideation especially among females adolescents [12]. In a study done in the USA, on psychological abuse among undergraduate students showed that victims experienced high levels of hostility compared to perpetrators. The study further revealed that there were no differences between the two groups in depression, anxiety, and somatization [13]. Similarly, findings in a woman sexual victimization survey done in USA at the National College, showed that 3 in 10 women reported being 'injured psychologically' from stalking and had some post-traumatic stress symptoms than victims of harassment or controls [14,15].

Studies have shown that depression and suicidal attempts are some of the most common health and psychological consequences of dating violence [15,16]. The study showed that the severity of the psychological symptoms of abuse and the percentage of women reporting depressive symptoms were related to the frequency and severity of the abuse [15]. This was

consistent with the study done in South Africa which also found that the negative feelings that come with abuse may cause one to psychologically withdraw from school or withdraw entirely altogether and stop going to class [17].

According to the Zambia Demographic Health Survey, half of women aged 15 to 49 experienced domestic violence (47 %) in 2014 [18]. Furthermore, Zambia study on urban sexual behaviour survey found that men were more likely to have multiple sexual partners compared to women [19]. Studies further reveal that sexual violence was a common problem in women [20]. It was further reported that sexual abuse among school girls by male teachers is mainly due to lack of punishment to perpetrators by those in authority [21,22]. Dating violence is a risk factor for HIV, its prevalence is high among young people in Zambia and can be associated with psychological problems [23]. High risk sexual behavior is also common among University students in Zambia [24]. Although studies have examined the prevalence and consequences of domestic violence, research examining the experiences of students exposed to dating violence is limited. The aim of this study was to describe the nature and extent of dating violence experienced by students at the University of Zambia.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study utilized qualitative method using a phenomenological approach to elicit descriptions of factors related to dating violence. The study used the qualitative research method. Participants of in the study recruited from the University students. 18 participants from the University of Zambia were recruited for the study. The site was chosen for longstanding history in dating violence, and to facilitate access to participants who met the following inclusion criteria: aged 16 to 30 years, students from the 2012/13 academic year to 2015/2016 academic year who were in their second, third, fourth or fifth years of study, had previously experienced dating violence, and were currently dating and accommodated at the University campus. In-depth interviews and semi-structured interview guide were used to collect the data. The interview guide allowed the participants to discuss the factors in their daily life which were related to dating violence. Interviews were in English, audio recorded and transcribed. Thematic content analysis was carried out in this study.

3. RESULTS

The study found various forms of dating violence experienced by students perpetrated by their dating partners. The research found that physical violence in dating relationships among female and male students manifested itself in different ways. Like violence in marital relationships, the abuse in dating relationships is often a series of physically violent and other manipulative or coercive behaviors used to exert power and control over the other. Interestingly, as opposed to popular belief, the current study found that physical violence disproportionately affects men.

Incident in which physical violence was experienced in a dating relationship involved a third-year female student whose narration is as follows:

One of the embarrassing and frustrating moments I recall vividly was during one of those study breaks that we have towards exams.

My course mates and I were studying at the Goma lakes; I don't know who told my boyfriend that I was chilling with some guys at the lakes, because he just came brutally and begun hurling insults at my friends and demanded that I leave with him....he began calling me names like 'hoe' 'bitch' and dragged me away from my mates...

Males recorded a higher incidence of sexual abuse. Some students had been infected with sexually transmitted diseases while others were coerced into sexual acts they did not want. An interesting finding in this research was that unlike the common perception of males being the only perpetrators of sexual violence, quite a large number of male victims were reported, in fact almost as much as their female counterparts, had experienced sexual violence at the University.

When we decided to finally have sex, we wanted it to be safe and free from worries say pregnancy and the like. But somewhere along the way, she started saying 'no me I react to using protection'....so to have someone go against your will and fake up some story like that is really uncalled for and confusing and hurting. So at that point now, you will just start doing things against your will just so you make her happy....like I mean we know that STIs are real. So if someone says okay let's use

protection then someone says no – to me that’s an abuse.

Throughout the interviews, all participants expressed being abused verbally by their intimate partners in their relationships. Interestingly, both male and female participants described verbal abuse as a common practice they experience from their partners.

One of the embarrassing and frustrating moments was studying at the Goma lakes with my male friends. I don’t know who told my boyfriend that I was with some guys at the lakes, he just came brutally and begun hurling insults at my friends and demanded that I leave with him. he began calling me names like ‘hoe’ ‘bitch’ and dragged me away from my mates. (Female participant)

This research found that verbal violence was rife and it manifested itself through partners saying hurtful and belittling things to their significant other, name-calling their partner and shouting at their partner as well as being too critical.

We had a bit of a misunderstanding; I decided to make her feel bad on purpose so I told her my ex was better than her. But her response left me shocked and feeling inadequate till now...she said she didn’t care after all her ex’s manhood was better than mine in every sense...do you know what this does to you as a man? [Fifth year male student].

It was more of physical appearance. ‘No you need to change this, you need to change that.’ I have always been a curvaceous and thick person. Even the time my boyfriend found me I was big. But little by little he begun commenting about “how much weight you’ve gained; maybe you should go on a diet”. When I tried to retaliate, he said it’s for my own benefit and I shouldn’t blame him if skinny girls start giving him attention because being ‘too’ big made me look like his older sibling. [Second year female student].

Some female respondents indicated that their partners shouted and/or criticized them even embarrassing them in public at times.

My boyfriend likes to say things like “Why can’t you behave like other girls? You are too serious with your life. You are too uptight.” He is too critical of everything I do starting with

spending time in the library and the clothes I wear [Second year female student].

While a male participant had this to say: *She gave me a pep talk once saying that I shouldn’t be wearing shorts when going to see her by her level because I look like a small child and I will embarrass her to her friends. I mean, no man wants to be told that they look like a boy or that their presence embarrasses their partner. That was a big blow to my ego and made me begin regretting having dated an older girl than me [Third year male student].*

More females than males reported experiencing sexual abuse from their partners. More female participants reported being forced into having sex with their partners even when they didn’t want.

When he came to pick me from my room, we went to his room where we started drinking alcohol there..... The next thing I remember was waking up in a pool of blood at Mayela lodge. I was so devastated and angry at him; but more devastated at myself for having found myself in this situation. My virginity is something I had held on to and valued so much; but to have someone take it away forcefully, to lose it unwillingly.... This is one of the most painful experiences I have had to live with and doubt I will ever forget [Fifth year female student].

Although it is commonly believed that males are the only perpetrators of sexual violence, this study found that females too are perpetrators of sexual violence towards males especially at the university which makes some partners even contract sexually transmitted disease.

My girlfriend is very abusive. I have literally experienced all the types of abuse you can think of at her hand including sexual abuses. At some point I even contracted an STD from her something which was very painful and disappointing. Unfortunately, I can’t leave her because I have invested a lot in this girl and this relationship [Fourth year male student].

More female than male participants that experienced sexual violence mentioned that their partners threatened to end their relationships if they did not agree to have sex.

...When I suggested to him that we should stop indulging into sexual acts he refused

and told me to choose whether I wanted to be with him or not, and that being with him entailed having sex with him....here I am-still with him.[Second year female student].

While another female participant shared that;

"I blame myself thinking had I not taken the alcohol, maybe he wouldn't have done what he did....had I not left school, maybe all this wouldn't have happened....I feel I am to blame for having entertained him." [Third year female student].

This research found that some of the respondents that had experienced sexual violence such as coerced sexual acts in their relationships blamed themselves because they felt had they been a little more careful, maybe in a different space altogether, the incidents would have been avoided. Both male and female participants reported that they suffered some form of psychological abuse and violence from their partners. Male respondents that experienced psychological violence reported to have received suicide threats from their partners at some point.

I really want to end the relationship I am in because I am not happy with it. My partner seems not to be willing to accept that, so she is threatening to commit suicide. At some point, she even wrote a suicidal note....after we had a misunderstanding, in the night, I tried calling her; she was ignoring the calls, so I went to her room and found that she wrote something suicidal in her diary. I ripped the page from the diary where she had written to show as evidence should anything happen to her....now I am in this predicament. I don't know what to do [Third year male student].

While a female participant had this to share:

Just in the beginning of our relationship, I wanted to end things because I felt he wasn't certain with whom he wanted to date either me or a certain other girl he was showing interest in at the same time as me. I kept telling him I would leave though he ever listened. But this one time when I got really brave and decided to move on (I blocked his number, deleted it and avoided him), he swore that if I didn't take him back, he was going to do something to himself and his blood would be on my hands....that his father walked out on him when he was young and if

I did the same, we would have no reason to continue living.

More males than females felt psychologically insecure about their physical appearance by their partner.

Because I look small physically while my girlfriend is sort of big, She has on a number of occasions commented on my physical appearance saying I should gain because I look like a child and when we get married, she doesn't want people to be saying I look like her younger brother. She has been insensitive towards my feelings like that; I used to be 'normal' sized, but due to some health complications I developed at some point, my weight just drastically declined and it has ever been the same again. This makes me feel really bad considering that I never comment on her body.[Second year male student].

My boyfriend makes me feel inadequate about how I look. You know he doesn't really say it to me directly about my appearance, but you would find that when we are watching series, he makes sort of provocative and sexual comments about the women in the series or any movie where there are extremely sexual and good looking girls....I have spoken with him about how this kind of talk makes me feel, but he says I'm overreacting....I's just never a good feeling being compared to someone else...the feeling of inadequacy is terrible. [Fourth year female student].

Further, more males than females reported to have received threats of abandonment. This came as blackmail when the males' girlfriends could not have their way on certain things and felt blamed for everything that went wrong in the relationship.

This person started abusing me psychologically because like there were just too many complaints.... sometimes she would say tell me if I am a bother to you so that I can find someone else who will give me attention whenever I need it.' [Second year male student].

Okay there are those times we could be seated like this then she just says, "Sometimes I just wish to date a guy who can just be taking me out almost every weekend...hmnn I wonder what it feels like to date a rich person...I can feel nice just for a

day to be spoilt with rich money like beyond my wildest thoughts [Third year male student].

While another participant had this to share; *this one time, she asked that I have her assignment typed and submitted on her behalf by 17 because she had left school early for something in town. When I went to submit her assignment, the office in which I should have left the assignment was locked. I went back twice but unsuccessful; as a result, she got penalized for late submission. She got mad at me. I still honestly don't understand. She has a tendency of lumping everything wrong in our relationship on me. She never willingly takes responsibility for anything.* [Fourth year male student].

A Fourth year female student had this to say regarding experiencing dating violence and her being aggressive. *...to be honest, he has also verbally and physically abused me before because I hit him first and insult when I see him being all protective of his phone...* [Fourth year female student].

...to be honest, he has also verbally and physically abused me before because I hit him first and insult when I see him being all protective of his phone... [Third year female student].

Some students when asked why they were subjected to violence after taking substances said that they no longer had inhibitions to prevent them from expressing their true thoughts on quite a number of issues in their relationships, and so what they said or did would sometimes be taken as offence by their partner. Female participants in this study reported being vulnerable to all sorts of dating violence because of the economic status and social environments they find themselves in with their partners.

I depend much on my boyfriend in terms of food here at school you know food is expensive something that you need to buy every time. He support me financially and helps with my upkeep on campus and this makes me him take advantage of me many times. I have to say yes to everything he says because if I refuse, he withdraws the support. [Second year female student].

From the above excerpt, clearly some female students may have a hard time escaping the

abuse they receive from their partners due to their dependency on their partners economically. This research also found that the social environment in which someone is in does contribute towards their experiencing of dating violence. It was found that respondents who indicated having friends that fanned trouble, or grew up in places where violence was viewed as part of life, also indicated having experienced dating violence.

I can understand why my boyfriend is not in support of most of my friendships. My girls and I had a life of promiscuity, clubbing, drinking and all those activities society labels; this contributed to my friends being beaten on several occasions by their boyfriends, and they stayed on despite that. I have found myself in the shoes of abuse too and staying on. I probably should not tolerate it, but I find myself thinking if my friends could handle it, so can I; after all my boyfriend is not all that bad in comparison to horror stories of other boyfriends' abuse I've heard before [Third year female student].

The following interview with a Third year male student depicts how having friends that fanned trouble contributes to dating violence as stated above.

I have friends that drink excessively, date multiple partners at once and abuse their girlfriends when they have a misunderstanding they get abused too at other times....they almost make everything seem so normal as if it were a part of life to give and receive violence....I strongly think perhaps that has contributed to my staying in my abusive relationship too because it seems business as usual [Fourth year male student].

A few participants especially males attributed dating violence to cultural practices which are acceptable in the society.

Sometimes even people that love each other the most fight whether verbally or physically.. Misunderstandings are part of life you just try to resolve issues and move on. You will never find anyone that is 100%. [Third year male student].

I know we advocate for rights of women, but truth still stands, you can never be equal with a man...our culture and religion have placed headship on a man and those are things difficult to change....you just accept and move

on for peace's sake....of course his actions are questionable sometimes. [Fourth year female student].

4. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study suggest that dating violence among students at the University of Zambia is perpetuated by a number of factors and the forms of violence they include; physical abuse, sexual abuse, psychological and emotional abuse and verbal abuse. Participants recognized physical abuse as a painful and distressing phenomenon. This is consistent with the findings from a study of Okojie & Lwemjiwe [25]. Physical violence was one of the most cited forms of violence in dating relationships at the University of Zambia. The findings of this study are in agreement with those of Mengistab, which suggest that students engage in severe physical violence against their partners, perpetrating acts such as punching, choking, kicking, slapping, biting, beating or attacking partners with a weapon [4].

In addition, through the results, university students who had experienced physical violence accepted the vice because they feared the implications of leaving their boyfriends. These patterns are consistent with the overall finding that the most common dating violence are experienced by female students at universities [26]. This study showed that substance abuse predisposes students in intimate relationships to being victims of dating violence and also being perpetrators of violence which is consistent with the findings in the study of Shorey [27]. It has been concluded that both the perpetrator and the victim of violence have admitted to higher levels of alcohol consumption than those who are not involved in unhealthy relationships [28].

Furthermore, the results of this research are consistent with the research findings of Shaffer that found that boys too are victims of dating violence especially physical violence mostly because it is still socially acceptable for girls to hit or slap boys in relationships although the boys don't easily disclose it to others for fear of shame from others [29,30].

Participants of this study described psychological violence which is in the form of inflicting damage on a partner's self-esteem, including yelling, referring to a partner in profane terms, like "bitch" or "whore," shaming or embarrassing a partner in the presence of others, being hypercritical, ridiculing, invalidating feelings, or projecting

personal responsibility for something beyond the partner's control as one of the worst kind of abuse those in relationships do experience. This is consistent with other study findings which highlights psychological abuse to something which makes people to suffer from different mental health challenges [17].

The results of this study point to the fact that sexual abuse is one of the most prevalent vices which female students experience at the University of Zambia. This is consistent with the study finding of Payne and Fogerty's study in the United States, which found that one-fourth of every college woman experienced some type of sexual assault [6]. Numerous researches have been able to show the relationship between children growing up in an abusive home, and their later experience of partner violence. In a study by Milletich in the United States, for example, it was found that witnessing parents' use of violence against each other and child abuse are known risk factors for later intimate partner violence [31]. The findings of this study suggest that the students' tolerance of violence may be because the victims need the financial support they are receiving from their abusive partner, more than they mind the abuse. This is in line with the social exchange and choice framework theory as stated by Ellsberg and USAID at poverty is one of the major factors contributing to violence against women especially violence against school and college girls [32,33].

Furthermore, this study findings suggest that the social environment contributes heavily to dating violence because many people in such an environment take violence as part of life coming from the values, views and attitudes that are communicated, encouraged and executed through their culture and traditional ideas and practices. This is consistent with other study findings which highlight culture and traditional teachings to be most common drivers of gender based violence in the community [21,22]. The University of Zambia, where most people come from different Zambian culture which is somewhat tolerant of violence as evidenced by Bourke-Martignoni's research findings, indicates that communities were tolerant of violence as it could be seen through what was encouraged in cultural and traditional teachings; these students also were found to have been victims of violence [34].

As for sexual violence experienced by university students who are dating is also consistent with the study by Okojie and Lwemjiwe's at University of Benin in 2013 that showed that sexual violence at

the institution among dating students stood at 23.3% [25]. Of the males that experienced sexual violence, 9 (7%) purported that they had been coerced into sexual acts that they did not want. Substance usage has the ability to impair one's cognition and ability to filter or protect themselves from harm as was also shown by a female student's experience of rape after taking alcohol. This finding was in line with the ecological model that pointed out that alcohol use places one at a risk of being violent or a victim of violence. In this case, these students were victims and unable to avert danger after consuming alcohol and/or other intoxicating substances. Furthermore, this finding is in line with research by Shorey, Stuart & Cornelius who assert that heavy alcohol consumption and substance abuse increases the risk of intimate partner violence because psychopharmacologic effects impair cognition and disinhibit aggression [27]. Therefore, victims are unable to avert danger.

Additionally, the ecological model points out that an individual's intake of alcohol places them at risk of being violent or being on the receiving end of violence. This study's findings mirrored those of Stappenbeck and Fromme at the University of Texas in 2004 to 2007 which showed the relationship between alcohol consumption and victimization and perpetration of dating violence [35]. The findings indicated that heavy drinking and dating violence were both relatively stable across time for men and women even though the relation between heavy drinking and dating violence differed by gender in that women that consumed alcohol recorded higher numbers of dating violence victimization in comparison to men who had a lesser record of being victimized as a result of alcohol consumption. It has been noted since the 1950s that substance abuse is directly linked to unhealthy relationships during the college years [36]. It has been concluded that both the perpetrator and the victim of violence have admitted to higher levels of alcohol consumption than those who are not involved in unhealthy relationships [28].

Life skills should be developed during rehabilitation and treatment, especially focusing on emotions, considering that there was a high indication of mental illnesses because of the inability to cope effectively with emotional abuse. The counseling center at the university should assist the violence victims to develop emotional maturity by allowing them to feel, acknowledge and manage their emotions. The aftercare support program should focus on the development of

coping skills and basic life skills such as stress management, conflict management, assertiveness, effective dealing with emotions and problem solving. The family should also be requested to be involved in aftercare services in order to establish support [14,15].

5. CONCLUSION

The study found that the forms of violence which students experience at the University of Zambia due to various factors. In view of the findings above, this study recommends that youth friendly corners should be formed within the university where victims of different forms of abuse can find safe spaces to share their stories with the aim of providing information on addiction and establishing sufficient and effective social support for service users [15]. The University of Zambia authorities can focus on prevention efforts on the situations that are most common to student's vulnerabilities. Knowledge about the circumstances which lead to dating violence can further help to target the situations in which students might be most vulnerable to violence from their partners. Further awareness could be made through periodic talks by various stakeholders or experts on issues related to this. These findings provide useful information for further research. One of the limitations of this study is that only a few participants were involved in the study hence making it difficult to generalize the findings.

CONSENT AND ETHICAL APPROVAL

The study received ethical approval from the University of Zambia, Zambia. The researchers ensured that ethical measures were adhered to by seeking clearance from the Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee at the University of Zambia. All participants were informed what the study was all about and they were told from the very outset that their participation in the study was voluntary and that they were free to answer or not to answer any question. Further, they were told that they were free to withdraw from the study at any time they wished. Participation was voluntary and an informed consent form was signed before the first interview. Participants were also assured of confidentiality of the information that they were providing. In this study, no participant's name has been mentioned.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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